

Ráhel K. Turai

Comparative Gender Studies PhD Program, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary.
Supervisor: Hadley Z. Renkin. ZtG supervisor: Sabine Grenz

Shifting Gender in Desire. Narratives of bisexually changing attraction, practice, and subjectivity in present-day Hungary

My research investigates the role of language in the personal constructions of bisexuality and multiple desires in the present-day Hungarian context. My research aims at a queer analysis of narratives about changing desires, which shows how desires, as well as desiring subjectivities, are performed through life stories. In favour of identity, even bisexual research tend to sideline *practices and desires*; this latter is thus my focus, without claiming to form statements about a group or community. Rather, engaging in studies of language and desire (see Cameron and Kulick 2003), I show the narrative processes which give specific meanings to various bisexual experiences. I thus provide a social-narrative analysis of 27 life course interviews I made between 2010 and 2013 in Budapest with people who report to have had desires for both women and men over their life span.

With this approach, I offer new insights both for post-structuralist bisexuality studies (emblemized by Hemmings, 2002) on the one hand, which, focusing on identities and politics, often avoids narrative approaches to life stories; as well as linguistic (sexual) anthropology on the other hand, which tend to marginalize bisexual desires. In contrast, I argue that the sociolinguistic examination of bisexual desires is especially fruitful, because of the challenged terrain it represents for people of any sexual identity, where we could see sexuality in constant change and flux, as well as in interaction with ideas of stability of self. The global binarism tangible in both strands of scholarship due to a lack of discussion of geographic areas potentially labeled as “Second World”, could be deconstructed through a bisexual-Central-Eastern-European lens. Firstly, through the complexity of power hierarchies in the post-socialist context, where ambiguities about homo/heterosexuality are structured around the discourse of Western/global/liberal-left vs. Eastern/national/Christian/conservative. And secondly, through the question of translatability of global and national languages (e.g., with Hungarian lacking gendered pronouns).

With a focus on narratives, I argue for approaching bisexuality through a butlerian performativity analysis, which suggests looking at sexualities as not the source but the *effect* of linguistic features. Therefore, my method focuses on the effects the interview narratives perform as in interaction with linguistic conventions, including broader Hungarian and international discourses. In this theoretical frame, focusing on the narrative work the

interview accounts are performing, through the comparison and contrast of the interviewees' explicit statements with their social-narrative implications, I ask the following questions:

- What does the language my interviewees use *do*, how does it perform multiple desires? How do the narratives constitute the interviewees as individuals with specific desires/practice/gender and sexual identities?
- To what extent do the narratives re/produce *change*? Which interviews index continuity more, and which ones discontinuity (in desires, selves, life course), and what can explain these differences? To what extent do the interviews present a closure or coherency to life stories and selves? More specifically, what do these linguistic formulations suggest about the social origin of homo-, bi-, and heterosexual desires?

With a post-structuralist focus on the temporal partiality of subjectivities, I examine narratives which re/produce bisexual desires as separated, serial sexual connections towards women and men in one's life; as well as others where such desires are co-existent as parallel or alternating. Revealing that the boundary between these two is not clear-cut, my research shows how can some bisexual desires be easily integrated into (gender- and heteronormative, as well as gay coming-out) life stories, whereas others require more explanatory work, indexing the dilemma of 'taking a side' both politically and sexually. Examining how the storytelling reflects the spatiality as well as the temporality of desires, I will argue that finding a language – a vocabulary, an ideological frame which is able to grant coherency – is necessary not only for same-sex desires to become lived experiences, but also for the heterosexual de-orientation from them. Making sense of the latter is made difficult by the ideology of "born this way" gayness. My interviewees' stories complicate the dichotomy of innate desire vs. rational decision, rather underpinning that desires are emerging in specific social situations. I thus challenge the myth of a universal female sexual fluidity, a frame with more disabling than enabling effects for women, as well as for men. Arguing for the *centrality of gender analysis in sexual research*, I show that sexual preferences and experiences are more informed by social gender characteristics than physical ones.

Therefore, the post-socialist framework of my research engages in the critique of queer theory on 'global/Western' neoliberal sexual identity politics, arguing that "LGB people" is a misleading expression, implying the fixed sexual division of people, and thus obscuring the social restriction of the exploration of non-heterosexual desires. Focusing on moments of change, my analysis suggests a view of human sexuality, as both desire and subjectivity, not simply as malleable but as something which cannot exist outside of specific social-cultural forces.